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ABSTRACT

Needs assessment is a fundamental part of evaluation, and yet it has not developed as rapidly in sophistication as other evaluation methodologies. This is largely due to the difficulty in measuring real needs, as opposed to wants, interests, etc. This paper discusses some of the critical issues in needs assessment, and outlines some of the fundamental questions that must be answered in order to design a valid and reliable needs assessment study. Emphasis is placed on the need for considering resources and constraints in designing a realistic approach to needs assessment. (Author)

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CRITICAL ISSUES IN

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Needs assessment is a fundamental part of evaluation, and yet it has not developed as rapidly in sophistication as other evaluation methodologies. This is largely due to the difficulty in measuring real needs, as opposed to wants, interests, etc. This paper discusses some of the critical issues in needs assessment, and outlines some of the fundamental questions that must be answered in order to design a valid and reliable needs assessment study. Emphasis is placed on the need for considering resources and constraints in designing a realistic approach to needs assessment.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Needs assessment is a large class of activities that are aimed at determining the needs that exist among a certain group of people. Sometimes these needs are obvious and readily observable; othertimes, these needs are hidden and not perceivable without fine instrumentation. If we assume, as I think we must, that all programs exist to serve people with needs, then the importance of needs assessment can be seen. In essence, needs assessment is the "front-end" of evaluation, and, as Michael Scriven (1978) has said, "it puts the value in evaluation." Evaluation completes the needs assessment by determining the extent to which needs have been met by a program intended to meet those needs.

We know much more about evaluation than we do about needs assessment. It is much easier to assess the effectiveness of a single program than to probe the ill-defined realm of human needs. Evaluation focuses on a single object, while needs assessment focuses on assessing a virtually infinite domain of needs. One of the factors that has led to the relatively slow development of the technology of needs assessment has been the fact that "needs" (real needs) are so difficult to measure. Like attitudes, motives, and personality traits, they are generally hidden below the surface of everyday awareness. It is rarely possible to receive a reliable answer to the question: "What are your needs?"

The most frequently used methods of needs assessment use questionnaires which ask that very question. The problem is that few people are aware of their real needs, or else real needs are confounded by perceptual biases. Often symptoms of needs are confused with real needs. For instance, the person who says he needs more money might only want more money, or money might be a substitute for a lack of self-esteem (or some other internal need). Attempting to discriminate between wants, interests, needs, and other related characteristics has been the most significant thorn in the side of needs assessors for a long time. When educators ask: "What courses do you need?" or "What skills do you need to learn?", it is virtually impossible to distinguish these felt needs from interests and wants. As a result, and to the extent that time and resources permit, conscientious needs assessors are using unobtrusive measures of need, such as archival records, observation of people at work, performance tests, rather than using questionnaires exclusively. The belief is that inferred needs are more legitimate than self-reported needs. However, as long as the limitations of questionnaire, self-report methods are understood, there is no harm in using them as part of a needs assessment effort.

The rest of this paper will deal with some of the other critical issues in needs assessment which are integral to developing an valid and reliable needs assessment instrumentation. Bear in mind that there is no one correct method of needs assessment, and the correct method for each assessor must derive from actual information requirements.

What type of needs are you interested in assessing?

Are there dificiencies in performance, skills, attitudes, motivation? It is vital that the needs assessor have some hypotheses concerning the apparent nature of the need. These hypotheses will determine the most appropriate methods of needs assessment. If there is a performance deficiency, it is important that performance be evaluated. If there is an "interest-need", then a questionnaire might be in order. Hypothesizing about the presumed nature of the need makes it possible to determine a strategy for assessing the need. Without such hypotheses, needs assessment would be like shooting in the dark.

What is the context of the need to be assessed?

Although we all try to be idealistic in needs assessment, and as objective as possible, we must recognize the realities of the situation. An educational organization is looking for needs that can be addressed by educational means, and the needs assessor would not stay employed long if he was not able to identify educational needs for the organization. We should also be aware of the political pressures that may impact on the needs assessment process. Who is powerful in the organization? Who should be involved in the needs assessment process? From the earliest stages of needs assessment, the problems of implementation must be anticipated and addressed. The context of needs assessment should be carefully defined if the needs assessment results are to have any impact at all.

What resources are available for needs assessment and subsequent action?

A fruitful needs assessment must be based on a realistic judgment of resources. We must know early in the process what type of (and how intensive) an effort the organization is willing and able to underwrite. In addition, to what extent is the organization willing and able to satisfy needs that might be assessed? It is the most fundamental rule of needs assessment that there must be commitment to meet with appropriate action any needs that are uncovered. Otherwise, needs assessment will become an exercise in frustration. As Scriven (1978) has explained, needs assessment and action planning to meet anticipated needs should be part and parcel of the same process.

How does one go about developing a plan for needs assessment?

In developing any needs assessment plan it is essential that the following questions be addressed:

1. For whom is the needs assessment intended? Information should be collected in an appropriate form for this person or persons.

2. Who is part of the target population? Although this might seem "Mickey Mouse", a frequent failing in needs assessment is an inadequate awareness of the client population.

3. What data collection methods should be used? The answer to this question depends on the hypothesized nature of the need and resources available.

4. Should sampling techniques be used? It is rarely necessary to observe all members of the target population. Often a small random sample of persons will suffice and decrease cost considerably.

5. Who should be involved and how should they be involved? It is rarely possible to do a comprehensive needs assessment alone, and the help of others in invariably required.

6. What are the anticipated costs and who needs to approve the plan? Required approvals of the plan and costs should be accomplished as soon as possible to facilitate revisions, if necessary, and to secure commitment for the project.

7. What constraints might hinder the needs assessment? Just as it is important to anticipate resources, it is also important to anticipate constraints. This way we can be prepared for the inevitable contingencies which might hinder the project.

How should the information be disseminated and used?

The needs assessor's job does not end with data collection. It is part of his duties to present the information to appropriate decision-makers and make sure that the information is being used appropriately. Those who are not used to making decisions based on needs assessment data might have great difficulty in doing so without help and guidance. The closeness of the needs assessor to the data makes it imperative that he participate in the development of action plans to meet assessed needs. In addition, it is essential that the needs assessor supervise a debriefing to determine the effectiveness of the process as used and to suggest improvements for the future.

Needs assessment is a complex process, the full complexity of which is just beginning to be recognized. It is not just a matter of objective data collection and analysis. This paper has endeavored to explain some of the complexities and suggest methods for dealing with them. It will be some time before the technology of needs assessment is as sophisticated as evaluation technologies. However, it is essential that this be the case, since evaluation is so integrally tied

to needs assessment. You see, it is ridiculous to put much credence in the evaluation of a program that might have illegitimate justification for its existence. Many programs, if adequately assessed in terms of needs satisfaction, might never have seen the light of day.

Reference

Scriven, Michael, "Needs Assessment: Concept and Practice," New Directions for Program Evaluation, 1, Spring, 1978, pp. 1-11.